

Labor and Population

Research Brief

RAND Program

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Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren What Do We Know?

Grandparents raising grandchildren have received considerable attention in recent years. Many observers perceive grandparent care to be a growing phenomenon. In fact, however, the proportion of children living with grandparents has remained relatively stable. Approximately 5 to 6 percent of grandchildren and 10 percent of grandparents live in grandparent-grandchild households at any given time.

While these percentages are low and steady, in the context of a growing youth population they represent growing total numbers. Nearly four million children, and 1.5 million grandparents, live in grandparent-grandchild households. These households face unique challenges, which vary depending on whether the grandchildren's parents—the middle generation—are also in the household.

Anne Pebley of RAND is leading a major study based on national data of this phenomenon and its implications. Her work with Laura Rudkin of the University of Texas examines estimates of the frequency of grandparent-grandchild households. It also provides an overview of research on the determinants of three-generation households (households including grandchildren, their parents, and grandparents) and split-generation households (households where grandparents are the sole caretakers of grandchildren). Pebley and Rudkin explore research results on the characteristics of grandchildren and grandparents in common households and identify a research agenda for this phenomenon.

GRANDCHILDREN LIVING WITH GRANDPARENTS

Of the four million children living with their grandparents, 2.5 million live in three-generation households. Nearly 1.5 million live in split-generation households. The proportion of all grandchildren living in three-generation households, 3.6 percent, has been steady in recent years.

The proportion in split-generation households, 2.1 percent, has risen slightly in recent years, after declining from 1940 through the 1980s.

Younger children are more likely to live with their grandparents. More than 10 percent of children under the age of two live with their grandparents; 3 percent of children 15 to 17 years old do so. The frequency of three-generation households is much higher for younger children than for older children. Split-generation households are about equally common for all ages. The differences by age in three-generation households likely reflect parents returning "home" during a transition of young adulthood (e.g., divorce, new child).

African American children are more likely to live with their grandparents. Of all African American children, 7.8 percent live in three-generation households, and 5.7 percent live without their parents in split-generation households. Black grandmothers historically have played a more important role than white grandmothers have in childrearing and maintaining extended family stability. Higher minority-family coresidence may also reflect higher poverty rates for minority families.

GRANDPARENTS LIVING WITH GRANDCHILDREN

Approximately 4.5 million grandparents, or 9.8 percent, head a grandparent-grandchild household at any one time. The number of grandparents and grandchildren who have *ever* lived together at any point in their lives is higher, since many grandchildren live with grandparents for a relatively short time.

A previous study, for example, found that while fewer than 5 percent of older white women were living with grandchildren in a specific year, more than 10 percent had lived with grandchildren at some time over a 15-year period. Among African American women, fewer

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than 18 percent lived with grandchildren in any single year, but more than 40 percent had lived with grandchildren at some point.

More than two-thirds of grandparents in both split- and three-generation households are living with a spouse. Grandparents in split-generation households, however, are older, less likely to be working, and more likely to have health or disability problems than grandparents in three-generation households.

The nature of grandparent care for grandchildren can be fluid, with three-generation households becoming split-generation, and vice versa. Living arrangements for children in low-income and single-parent families may be particularly fluid.

DETERMINANTS OF GRANDPARENT CARE

No single study or set of studies has provided a thorough analysis of grandparent-grandchild households. Pebley and Rudkin, however, uncover a partial picture of the determinants of grandparent care through their analysis of past studies.

Despite the focus on grandparent care in poor urban neighborhoods, previous research has shown that split-generation households are equally common in central cities and in rural areas. In urban areas, split-generation households are more likely to be poor and black, while those in rural areas are more likely to be white and less likely to be poor. Three-generation households are also more common in urban areas than elsewhere.

Research suggests that split-generation households are formed when parents are no longer able to take care of their children because of physical or mental illness, substance abuse, or economic problems. Three-generation households, on the other hand, are generally formed because of problems parents encounter living independently, such as separation or divorce, unemployment, or

economic need. High public assistance or welfare benefits and better job opportunities reduce the chances that parents and grandchildren live with grandparents. Three-generation households are more common if the mother was a teenager, unmarried, or had a medical disability at the time of birth.

Previous analyses also find that grandparents are reluctant to provide care but are likely to do so because of emotional, drug, mental, or alcohol problems by parents, or because the grandparent did not want the grandchild to go to a foster home. Further research is needed to determine why grandparents are more likely to intervene in some situations involving divorce, separation, unemployment, neglect, or abuse but not others. Among households headed by grandparents in which both grandchildren and adult children reside, the needs of adult children appear to be the primary determinant of coresidence. Divorce, birth of a new child, and unemployment all increase the likelihood of coresidence. Better job opportunities, availability of public assistance, lower housing prices, and higher parental income reduce the probability of coresidence.

FUTURE RESEARCH NEEDS

A major roadblock in understanding grandparents' care for grandchildren is a lack of data. Few surveys ask adult respondents with children about whether they are grandparents. Furthermore, collecting information on the factors that may create a need for grandparent intervention—including family stress and abuse, drug and alcohol use, and mental health problems—is especially difficult.

Pebley and her colleagues are analyzing more representative data on grandchildren and the grandparents who care for them, as well as on the determinants of this kind of care over the course of childhood. Grandparent care for grandchildren affects both children and their grandparents. This continuing research will provide new insights on the state of family relations, particularly intergenerational relations, in the United States.

RAND research briefs summarize research that has been more fully documented elsewhere. This research brief describes work done in RAND's Labor and Population Program as part of the Population Research Center and supported by a grant from the National Institute for Child Health and Human Development. This research is described in detail in Anne R. Pebley and Laura L. Rudkin, "Grandparents Caring for Grandchildren: What Do We Know?" Journal of Family Issues, Vol. 20, No. 2, 1999, pp. 218-242. Abstracts of RAND documents may be viewed on the World Wide Web (<http://www.rand.org>). RAND® is a registered trademark. RAND is a nonprofit institution that helps improve policy and decisionmaking through research and analysis; its publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions or policies of its research sponsors.

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